

## FORUM

# MEDIA COVERAGE ON ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN MALAYSIA

By

Zainoor Sulaiman

“Is it really Malaysia against the environment? Is Malaysia the only country in the world selling timber? Is there a dark shroud of noxious fumes and smog constantly blanketing the whole country? Are all rivers dead, barely moving water courses overlaid with thick chemical with a thick coat of oily and chemical sludge? Do we need to warn people, just like countries in Europe, not to drink the water issuing from taps? Are we giving way to sand dunes and semi-arid scrub-land?”

(*The New Sunday Times*, Aug. 18, 1991)

## INTRODUCTION

The apocalyptic vision of Malaysia presented by environmental groups somehow does not match with the general perception of the Malaysian public of the land around them.

Certainly, by just looking around, one can find instances illustrating all of the above horrors. But then, is there any developing or developed country in the world which can stand up to emerge clean from such selective scrutiny?

And surely the issue should be not whether Malaysia has environmental problems, but whether Malaysia is doing anything about it.

This paper intends to deliberate the role of the media in Malaysia, its coverage, probe and investigations and the media reactions to international outburst on environmental issues affecting the country with special reference to events and developments during the past years.

## Coverage

The Malaysian press, both the electronic and the print media, have been very active in promoting public awareness on the environmental issues.

News and reports on environmental issues have always landed as headlines or banner stories and are broadcast during prime air time of radio and television networks. While the newspapers print both local and international features, special reports, comments and opinions on environmental matters, the electronic media also broadcast similar programmes acquired from a broad or produced locally, aimed at further promoting public awareness on the issue.

Promos, jingles, video-strips, drama and comedy sketches are also produced and aired to further inculcate the sense of responsibility among members of the public to their own environment.

### Green Awareness

As the result of vigorous media campaigns, 1991 has been a rather progressive year on the conservation front. With growing public awareness, environmental issues slowly gained prominence as both the government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) got into the act and initiated several measures aimed at conservation.

In line with the year's "Projek Bumiku" (My Land Project), the government has declared 1992 as Recycling Year. The Project hopes to get every individual household to recycle.

The media task is to get the people to participate actively in the programme. In the beginning, this would entail getting people to separate garbage and things that can be recycled outside once a week. This includes recycling paper, glass and metals. Later on this could be widened to include old clothes and batteries.

Starting the ball rolling was the "Turn Your Can Green" campaign which began in May, last year. Thanks to the media blitz, the 'Cash -a- Can' concept — whereby the public return their aluminium cans for money — caught on well with the public.

The BP Malaysia together with the leading English Language daily the *New Straits Times* has launched a four-month 'Clean and Green' recycling campaign ending March 31, of the year. It was launched by Science, Technology and Environment Minister Law Hieng Ding. During the campaign period BP customers and members of the public are encouraged to deposit their used drink cans into specially-designed bins at 50 BP service stations in the Klang Valley. The cans can be recycled.

The national tabloid *The Star* appeared with a "green" banner on New Year's Day. The important message was that the newspaper has started to use recycled newsprint from this year onwards. Efforts in this area are still continuing.

### Landmark Events

Other landmark events involving the media, in 1992 include the World Environment Day celebrations on June 5 and the Malaysian Environmental Week beginning October 21. The theme of the week was "My World, My Home." Speaking at the occasion, Science, Technology and Environment Minister Law Hieng Ding said Malaysia is sincere in its efforts to conserve the environment and has made several sacrifices in development to achieve these ends.

He cited the Langkawi Declaration on Environment which was made during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) which Malaysia hosted in 1989. Two years since the declaration came into being, Malaysia has actively pooled its efforts and co-operated globally to meet its objectives.

A significant development since the Langkawi Declaration has been the new and added role and responsibility of the Department of Environment (DOE) in the recently launched 6th Malaysia Plan. According to DOE Director-General Dr. Abu Bakar Jaafar, in the past the department has mainly been playing the role of a regulatory agency. Now, it also has to undertake a developmental role as well as to be more

effective in enforcement.

The *Business Times* in its editorial on the Oct. 22 said "the various activities drawn-up to mark the Malaysian Environment Week serve to demonstrate the Government's sincerity and seriousness in preserving the environment and trying to make the people more conscious of, and more friendly towards it. The Government is working together with the World Conservation Union, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the United Nations Environment Programme in the global launch of Caring for the Earth, a Strategy for Sustainable Living, that is, combining development and conservation efforts to ensure that Man's actions are well within Earth's capacity.

"It is on occasions such as this that these serious environment protection and promotion agencies heap praises at Malaysia and other countries for what they have done and are doing in the name of Nature. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad is being lauded for making out a case for conservation as a central issue for human survival. Malaysia, it is said, can be proud of its record of acting positively on the World Conservation Strategy launched back in 1980. These organisations have noted approvingly that the Economic Planning Unit (of the Prime Minister's Department) is working with WWF Malaysia in embarking on a national conservation strategy."

*Business Times*, however, questioned as to why these groups save "such sweet words" for such occasions. "Why couldn't these organisations stand up and say these things when Malaysia came under attack from radical environmentalists?"

"Where was WWF Malaysia and the Malayan Nature Society when radicals staged Penan Day in the industrial countries, and chained themselves to the dockside cranes to try to embarrass Malaysia?"

### **Global Assault on Malaysia**

In what promises to be another escalating series of war against sovereign governments, the environmentalist movement has launched a global assault against Malaysia, according to an article published in the weekly *Executive Intelligence Review*, a Washington-based publication. On July 5, eight environmentalists assaulted and took over several log barges and cranes in Sarawak, to protest against the harvesting of timber. The assault and subsequent arrest of the perpetrators have been used to mobilise environmentalists world wide to put pressure on western governments to ban the import of wood and other timber-products from Malaysia.

Although Malaysia is the immediate target, the environmentalists have made it clear that Indonesia has to follow soon, and the ultimate target is Brazil, and India, yet too powerful to challenge.

**The war against Malaysia is part of a sequence of action scheduled to take place before the U.N. 'Earth Summit' in Brazil in June 1993.**

During the summit, an international ecology treaty will be signed which will govern all trade and economic activities in the name of saving Northern Earth from man's supposedly destructive industrial activities.

The environmental assault on Malaysia's logging industry on July 5 was carried out with a great precision by the white-skinned, Anglo-Saxon environmentalists who had been flown in from a base of operations called the Rainforest Information Centre in Australia.

The environmentalists, mostly members of Earth First, an organisation which advo-

cates violence and terrorism in defense of Mother Earth, were part of a team of 20 foreigners, the rest of whom were providing logistical and media support.

At the crack of dawn, the 'Sarawak 8' as they call themselves, assaulted several cranes and barges used for logging, chaining themselves to the equipment. The action had been carefully planned, and the press was present throughout the incident, taking footage which was quickly sent to Singapore for international transmission. After eight and a half hours, the police ended the takeover by arresting the environmentalists.

It should be noted that none of the many other foreign environmentalists present were arrested, or in anyway harassed by the Malaysian police.

The Sarawak 8, six of whom pleaded guilty and were given a 60-day jail term, have become 'causes celebre' internationally.

**Their arrest is being used by the international environmental movement to whip up hatred and hysteria against the government of Malaysia.**

The eight environmentalists arrested in Malaysia are: Anja Light, Sweden, Rainforest Information Centre; Angie Zelter, U.K., Earth First; Carten Huettche, Germany, Robin Wood; Jake Burbridge, U.K., Earth First; Jake Krielick, U.S., Earth First; Deborah Witkins U.S., independent; Ralf Schmitt, Germany, Robin Wood; Nancy Rolfe, Australia, Earth First.

**In essence, the war against Malaysia is being used to set up an international infrastructure that can attack and topple the sovereign governments of the Third World nations, using the excuse of saving environment.**

The timing of this operation is critical: At the Earth Summit in Brazil in June, Malaysia is chosen as the first target as it is small and isolated.

The environmental war against Malaysia is now being largely carried out in the West.

The *New Sunday Times* in its Aug. 18 editorial said: "Environmentalists make so much of their noble mission in protecting the environment which sustains all of us. Good cause. Good thoughts. But when it comes to practice, these very same people do not really see or treat people as human beings but as symbolic pawns playing out a scenario of conflicts between heroes and villains. They do not credit Malaysians with intelligence, with a similar concern for the health of the land and themselves.

They do not pay attention to the many projects and law directed at conserving or protecting what remains and punishing those who are sloppy in how they use things, in how they get rid of things. It is good to be passionate about the environment, but the good cause is undermined if people are blind to any evidence or fact which will refute their thesis, and their current thesis seems to be that Malaysians are rapacious abusers of the environment. Does that sound like Malaysia? Is Malaysia, its government and its people, so blind as to sell their future for the pleasures of today?

"The Penan has become a convenient rallying point for passions of the international environmental groups ... the noble savage may play well in documentaries and glossy magazine features, ... should we trot out our natives as anthropological curiosities for the edification of foreign scholars or tourists? Should we turn our backs on progress ..."

"Instead of working with Malaysians to clean up the land and sea and air, environmental groups have decided to adopt an adversarial stance against the country. Instead of taking note of the many strengths and achievements of Malaysia, environmental groups are hoping to succeed in a campaign directed against the economic lifeblood of the country."

The number of editorials and commentaries published by the Malaysian newspapers indicate the level of involvement and commitment of the Malaysian media to the

environmental conservation.

### **Magazines**

The weekly and monthly magazines have also devoted special pages on environmental issues. For example, the leading Malay language news magazine *Dewan Masyarakat* published a two-part special in-depth pull out edition on the People and the Environment in its last November and December issues. The latest issue of *Negarawan*, published by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) also ran several articles on environmental issues affecting the country.

### **Study**

The *Dewan Masyarakat* also conducted a random study to determine the level of Malaysian awareness on issues pertaining to environment. Of the 120 respondents interviewed, 63 per cent said they were not happy with the quality of the environment, 81.8 per cent expressed concern for environment in their daily life, 52.7 percent were uncertain about the depletion of the ozone layer but 74.3 per cent said it would result in skin cancer. The majority of the respondents (87.2 per cent) said they would abide if issued with guidelines on environmental control.

Another interesting feature of the survey was that over 60 per cent of the respondents said they were willing to pay more for items or services which could help conserve environment.

### **Conclusion**

How does one determine the level and the extent of media involvement in environmental issues? The best way to gauge this is by looking at the number of stories, reports, features, write-ups and pictures published daily in the local media.

In Malaysia, one can never fail to find such reports in our dailies. A quick glance at some of the press clippings enclosed herewith for the period from January 1-15, 1992, clearly illustrate the priority and importance given by the Malaysian press to the coverage of environmental issues.

In simplistic term, the Malaysian press has always been receptive and responsive to any issues that affect the life of the community in general and its readers in particular.